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ABSTRACT

This study described how one educator organized her instructional practices around a mandated assessment portfolio, examining the effectiveness of this endeavor. It investigated the benefits and/or disadvantages of organizing instructional practice around assessment portfolios, whether student self-efficacy and overall performance in portfolio development would increase as a result of the implemented changes, and whether students' attitudes toward portfolios would change positively as a result of implemented changes. Student surveys were administered early and late in the semester. Results indicated that while most students assumed a positive attitude toward portfolios, the project failed to positively impact those who were unsure about portfolios. Student self-efficacy and competency in compiling portfolios increased substantially due to the process. Students also gained a heightened metacognitive awareness of the learning process and were more motivated to strive for quality work. They began to see teaching as a reflective practice. The paper concludes that students should begin with a learning portfolio versus an assessment portfolio, because it allows students authority for making decisions on portfolio structure, content, and process. (Contains 11 references.) (SM)

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Running head: INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE AND PORTFOLIO

Organizing Instructional Practice Around the Assessment Portfolio: The gains and the losses

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Abstract

This exploratory study describes a teacher educator's efforts to organize her instructional practice around an assessment portfolio mandated by the state and examines the effectiveness of such endeavor. Findings revealed that, when a link between teaching and the required assessment portfolio was created, students' self-efficacy and performance in compiling the portfolio substantially improved, the instructor's instructional practices were better organized, students' metacognitive awareness of learning process was heightened, the instrumental value of course assignments increased, and students' understanding of teaching and learning as reflective acts was reinforced. The article concludes with a suggestion that teacher education program should make learning portfolios, not assessment portfolios, their first and second year students' first formal experience with portfolios to ensure a high level of student engagement in the process of portfolio development.

Organizing Instructional Practice Around the Assessment Portfolio: The Gains and the Losses

Introduction

In teacher education programs, portfolio assessment has been included as part of diverse evaluation of teacher candidates and programs (Copenhaver, Waggoner, Young, & James, 1997; Lyons, 1998; Wade & Yarbrough, 1996) as well as for accreditation at state and national levels (Synder, Lippincott, & Bower, 1998; Wolf & Dietz, 1998). In Missouri, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) mandated the implementation of the Missouri Standards for Teacher Education Programs (MoSTEP) which parallels the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards endorsed by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). To document the successful attainment of these standards, students in our program are required to compile a portfolio beginning in their second year in the program (i.e., Block II) and continuing through the senior year (i.e., Block IV) and the student teaching experience.

In MoSTEP standards, there are ten Quality Indicators, each having a number of Performance Indicators that provide benchmarks for three levels of attainment. The three levels are set as "Meets the Standard" (i.e., the teacher candidate not only has the knowledge base but also the ability to apply the knowledge in teaching), "Not Yet Meeting the Standard" (i.e., the candidate may

have the knowledge but are not yet able to apply that knowledge to teaching), and "Insufficient Evidence" (i.e., there is barely any evidence to support the candidate's meeting of that standard).

The portfolio consists of two parts: (a) artifacts selected by teacher candidates that serve as supporting evidence for meeting these standards, and (b) reflections in which teacher candidates rationalize their selection of a particular artifact to support meeting a particular standard. Expectations of preservice teachers to meet these Quality Indicators vary from Block to Block. Table 1 shows the various benchmarks the department adopts for different blocks.

Wolf and Dietz (1998) identified this type of portfolios as assessment portfolio, whose primary purpose is to "evaluate teacher performance for certification, licensure, or professional advancement" (p.16). The term Snyder, Lippincott and Bower (1998) used was credential portfolio which responds to and is organized around externally defined standards.

Problems observed. As an instructor, I started to involve in assisting Block II students (i.e., junior level elementary education majors) in the process of portfolio development in the fall of 2000. Based on the data collected by way of a survey, direct observations and personal interactions with my students, I found that there was an overall passitivity in students' attitudes towards the portfolio, and quite a few students who considered the portfolio an add-on to their already heavy coursework load and tight study schedule. In fact, the survey I conducted

in the spring semester of 2001 revealed that an overwhelming majority of the students ranked Portfolio as "not very useful." I also observed evidence of anxiety and frustration among about one-third of the students throughout this initial compiling process. Those students demonstrated a degree of incompetence and their portfolios were considered unacceptable by the departmental criteria at the end of Block II experience. One of the major problems observed was inappropriate selection of artifacts for the standards, and their reflections on the artifacts were irrelevant to the corresponding standards.

I attributed those students' lack of initiative in compiling the portfolios, their anxiety and frustration as well as the displayed incompetence in compiling the portfolio to three factors: (1) there lacked an apparent link between the portfolio and students' coursework, thus the instrumental nature of the portfolio was vague, (2) students' knowledge about portfolio assessment in terms of its significance, processes involved and organizational skills needed was very limited, so the sense of self-efficacy which is a prerequisite for any engaged endeavor was lacking, and (3) students did not fully understand the mandated standards which are complex and condensed in content and wording.

Actions taken. In response to these perceived problems, I made some substantial changes in my teaching in the fall semester of 2001. Around the five MoSTEP standards for portfolio developing required of Block II students, I reorganized the course contents and redesigned course assignments. That is, I

used these standards as the guidelines for my instructional decisions on contents and assignments. Specifically, I

1. aligned the instructional contents with these five standards, which are "Knowledge of Subject Matter," "Knowledge of Human Development," "Motivation and Classroom Management," "Communication Skills," and "Professional Development."

2. linked course assignments to the documentation of artifacts for the portfolio, and

3. provided students with concrete assistance to help them truly understand those MoSTEP standards.

Research goals. My study was guided by the following questions:

1. What, if any, benefits and/or disadvantages are to be gained by organizing instructional practice around the assessment portfolio?

2. Will students' self-efficacy as well as their overall performance in portfolio increase as a result of the implemented changes?

3. Will students' attitudes towards portfolio change positively as a result of the implemented changes?

Method

The study was conducted in my own classroom with 24 students in the fall semester of 2001. Of the 24 students, 15 were elementary education majors, 5 were early childhood majors, and 4 were special education majors.

The principal means of data collection was two surveys. Conceptually the same, the two surveys were administered at different points of the fall semester, one being early in the semester when students were first introduced to the required portfolio, and the other at the end of the semester when they were ready to officially submit their portfolios. All 24 students participated in the study, but data from three of them were discarded due to their incompleteness.

Implementation of the Changes

Aligning the instructional content with the five Quality Indicators for Block II. I was assigned by the department to teach the same class of students (n = 24) all the blocked courses which included one methodology class for elementary reading, one methodology class for elementary language arts, one educational psychology class. I also supervised them in their field experience. As an instructor, I had the freedom to decide which chapters from the textbooks to include in the course syllabi. In the previous two semesters, connecting the course contents with the portfolio was not my concern. Portfolio was treated as an extra task assigned by the department in addition to the regular teaching assignments. However, in the fall semester of 2001, I used those Quality Indicators as the guidelines in my decision on the contents of the courses I taught. My goal was to make the instructional content directly related to the five Quality Indicators required of Block II students. Table 2 shows this alignment.

Linking course assignments to the documentation of artifacts for the portfolio. To change the situation that the assignments and projects I used to assign to my students in the previous semesters failed to address students' need to generate artifacts from their course work, I modified the assignments in a way that each of the assignments was connected to the five standards in one way or anther; that is, each could be an artifact candidate for the portfolio. Table 3 illustrates the assignments I developed for each of these standards, and a brief description for each of the assignments is provided below the table. For each assignment, I provided detailed assignment sheets, by which I intended to help my students see the connection between what they did for the courses and what they could document for their portfolio.

Results

Students' attitude toward the portfolio. Students' attitude towards the portfolio was assessed through five aspects: (1) their perception of usefulness of portfolios, (2) their perception of the importance of developing the portfolio, (3) their preference between portfolios and traditional assessment methods, (4) their indicated intention to use portfolio assessment in their future teaching, and (5) their expressed level of personal liking for developing a portfolio.

The results of students' perception of usefulness of portfolio are shown in Figure 1. In responding to the question asking if they thought developing a portfolio was a useful and beneficial learning experience for them, 76% of the

students said "Yes" in Survey 1, and the percentage remained the same in Survey 2. However, while only 10% said "NO" in Survey 1, the percentage increased to 19% in Survey 2, and while 14% indicated "Unsure" to the question in Survey 1, this percentage dropped to 5% in Survey 2.

For the question "How important is it to you to compose a portfolio," students were asked to respond on a 5 to 1 scale (5 = very important; 1 = not important at all). Data showed that, in both Survey 1 and Survey 2, while 62% of the students considered it important to compose a portfolio (4-5), about 38% of them saw it as not important (1-2) (see Figure 2).

Figure 3 shows students' indicated preference between portfolio and traditional assessment methods. In responding to the question "Do you think portfolio is a more effective alternative assessment method in comparison with traditional assessment methods?" 57% in Survey 1 and 52% in Survey 2 said "Yes." While 5% said "No" in Survey 1, but 29% in Survey 2. The change tendency reflected in this is relatively disturbing: while 33% of the students remained the same in both surveys in saying "Yes," 43% students' attitude towards portfolio seemed to have changed, but not to a positive direction, either from "Yes" to "No" (19%), or from "Unsure" to "No" (10%), from "Yes" to "Unsure" (5%), and from "Unsure" to "Unsure" (14%), and only 5% changed from "No" to "Yes," and 14% changed from "Unsure" to "Yes."

Students' indicated intention to use portfolio in future teaching is shown in Figure 4. In answer to the question asking if they would use portfolio with their own students in the future teaching, 67% said "Yes" in Survey 1, and 47% in Survey 2. While only 14% said "No" in Survey 1, but the percentage increased to 48% in Survey 2. Fewer students claimed to be "Unsure" in Survey 2.

Figure 5 illustrates students' expressed level of liking for portfolio. In answer to the question asking how much they like developing a portfolio as part of their learning experience in Block II, the high liking level (4-5) increased from 29% in Survey 1 to 43% in Survey 2, but the low level of liking (1-2) increased from 15% in Survey 1 to 24% in Survey 2.

In sum, data have shown that, while an overwhelming majority of students assumed a positive attitude toward portfolio, this portfolio experience has failed to turn those who belonged to "unsure" category in Survey 1 to the positive "Yes" category in Survey 2. Before they started the portfolio process, those students were unsure about portfolio in terms of its usefulness, their preference to it when compared to traditional assessment methods, and their intention to adopt it in their future teaching, but after the portfolio experience, many of them turned to the "No" category.

Students' self-efficacy in compiling portfolio. Students' self-efficacy in compiling the portfolio was obtained through their self-ranking on a scale ranging

from 1 to 5 (1 = not confident at all, 5 = very confident), and their expected grade for the portfolio at the end of the semester.

The students' indicated self-confidence level is shown in Figure 6. The students' overall self-efficacy level seems increased significantly. While no one claimed to be very confident in Survey 1, the percentage jumped to 19% in Survey 2. While Survey 1 showed that 71% of the students indicated they felt either "not confident" or "no confidence at all" about the portfolio, the percentage dropped to 10% in Survey 2.

Figure 7 displays students' projected grades for their portfolio. Though the percentage of those who expected an "A" dropped from 76% in Survey 1 to 62% in Survey 2, the overall positive projecting remains the same in both surveys in that still 95% of the students expected either an "A" or "B" in Survey 2.

In sum, after students went through the process, their confidence in compiling the portfolio increased substantially, yet their grade projecting seemed to become more realistic.

Students' performance in developing the portfolio. An apparent improvement in students' portfolio quality was observed when the students' portfolios from the fall semester of 2001 were compared to the ones from the previous semesters. Figure 8 shows this observed improvement. While only 64% of students' portfolios in the fall semester of 2000 and 70% in the spring semester

of 2001 met the departmental criteria, 100% of the students' portfolios from Fall 2001 passed.

Discussion

The study was initiated out of my concern about my students' struggle with their portfolios. My attempts to help them go through the process led me to using the requirements for the portfolio as the guidelines for my instructional decisions. By organizing my instructional practice around the assessment portfolio, I witnessed the following observations:

Increased student self-efficacy and performance in developing the portfolio. The most obvious and notable evidence that showed the benefits of organizing instructional practice around the portfolio came from students' increased self-efficacy and competency in compiling the portfolio. Students' overall performance in compiling the portfolio has significantly improved. All of the students' portfolios from Fall 2001 passed based on the benchmark for Block II. Course assignments that were developed around the standards seem to have helped the students understand the standards, because no evidence of inappropriate selection of artifacts for standards was found.

Better organization of instructional practices. My teaching was better organized than before. Since I had to teach all the blocked courses (there were four altogether) to the same group of students, the granted freedom to choose what contents to include in each course had always presented itself a real

challenge to me. I was not certain if the decisions I made were well founded. Now with the portfolio evaluation benchmarks at hand, and when the course content decision was made on the basis of the MoSTEP standards, I felt an increased confidence in my own choices of the course contents, and I felt more certain than before that those decisions were professionally validated and administratively supported. As a result of this change, I also felt that the courses I taught were more thematically related to each other. For example, in following the standard of "Knowledge of Human Development," I consciously chose the chapters that were related to the theme of "Development," such as theories of cognitive development (e.g., Piaget's, Vygotsky's), theory of psychosocial development (e.g., Erikson's), theories of moral development (e.g., Kolhberg's, Piaget's, and Gilligan's), and theory of language development (e.g., Chomsky's, and Skinner's). In order to follow the standard of "Professional Development" which requires reflective quality of preservice teachers, I deliberately created a theme of "reflection" among the assignments that I assigned to my students. For one course, I asked them to complete an Observation Web in which they observed and then reflected on what and how their cooperating teachers taught in the classroom (e.g., teaching styles, teacher-student interactions, reward systems, classroom management strategies, etc.). In another course, I asked them to write a Literacy Autobiography in which they identified and reflected on those environmental factors that contributed to the way they read and write today. For

another course, I asked them to observe and reflect how their peers taught in a simulated situation. My goal was to maximally engage them in reflective practice, reflecting on the learning and teaching practices of their own and others which included their cooperating teachers, their peers as well as experts in the textbooks.

Heightened metacognitive awareness of the learning process. When a link among curriculum, instruction, and portfolio assessment was created, the portfolio compiling process was situated in a specific and immediate teaching and learning context. My students were able to chart what was being taught and learned in the coursework against the state mandated credential standards and see how it fitted into the bigger picture of the teacher education, and thus the "development of coherence, connection, and linkage of theory and practice in guiding students toward meaningful synthesis of coursework" (Mills & Reisetter, 1995) was facilitated, and as a result, their learning turned into a more conscious process. As one student responded in Survey 2, "Now I understand why I learned certain subjects," and another student stated, "(I now) understand what I have done and why."

Increased instrumental value of the course assignments. When the connection between the courses and the portfolio was explicitly articulated, students were more motivated to strive for quality work for each assignment. The instrumental aspect of the course assignments was highlighted when students

were well aware that each of those assignments they were working on could be selected as their portfolio artifacts later.

Reinforced understanding of teaching and learning as reflective acts. With this change, my students were "pushed" to see that teaching is a reflective practice. When they strived to meet the standards, they must be reflective: When they were engaged in the process of making decision as to what to include in the portfolio, and which assignment could best represent their learning, they reflected; when they wrote the reflections to justify their selection of a particular assignment as the artifact, they also reflected.

Before the study I believed that, by connecting my teaching to the portfolio, I would be able to help my students assume a more positive attitude toward portfolio. However, such outcome was not found from the results of this study. Students' attitude toward portfolio did not seem to become more positive after they went through the portfolio process. Instead, the comparison of the two surveys revealed more negative feelings among some students. More students claimed that they would not use portfolio with their own students in the future. More students doubted about the effectiveness of portfolio as a more effective assessment when compared to the traditional assessment methods. Some students explained that portfolio was very important to them just "because it is required," and "it is necessary to graduate," otherwise, they didn't consider it important. Some students expressed their doubt about the benefits the portfolio could bring

them. One of them mentioned: "I have spoken with principals who say they never look at them (portfolios) during (job) interviews." The other one complained: "I feel like I'm only concentrating (on) a few set (of) ideas and I'm working just to fill a point." Many students put "over 40-50" when asked how many hours they spent on their portfolio and complained that the whole process was too time-consuming.

I believe this observed negativity in some students' attitude towards portfolio was partially caused by the nature of the portfolio, the nature of an assessment portfolio. Wolf and Dietz (1998) identified three portfolio models: learning, assessment, and employment, each of which serving different purposes. Among the three models, the learning portfolio is much more easily than the assessment portfolio to trigger students' interest and stimulate their motivation in the compiling process due to its promotion of students' self-exploration, self-reflection and autonomy over the process. For the assessment portfolio, on the other hand, restricted by its emphasis on evaluation, accountability and responsiveness to the externally defined standards (e.g., MoSTEP standards), students' individual learning goals are sacrificed to some extent. In compiling a portfolio of this nature, students' creativity is limited, and their ownership of their own work is inhabited (Snyder, et al., 1998). Thus, some negative feelings generated from the process should not be a completely unanticipated outcome.

I believe that this disturbing finding has at least cautioned us against one important issue: the appropriate time for assessment portfolios to be imposed on preservice teachers. This study has convinced me that preservice teachers should start with a learning portfolio, not an assessment portfolio. A learning portfolio permits students' authority for making decision on their portfolios' structure, content and process (Wolf & Dietz, 1998), thus their creativity and initiatives are encouraged. Besides, for a learning portfolio, the student is the primary audience of his/her own portfolio, not some educational organizations or authorities, so the compiling process is much less stressful than the assessment portfolio. For preservice teachers who are at their initial stages of professional development, such encouragement as well as stress-free context to learn about portfolio is of critical importance. Of the 21 students who participated in the study, none of them had had any direct involvement in portfolio assessment before, and for most of them, the previous exposure to portfolio was minimal. This portfolio experience was their very first formal encounter with portfolio, and the first impressions obtained from this experience can color their feelings about portfolio and influence their use of portfolios in their future careers and classrooms. I believe that one way to make our students' first formal experience with portfolio a positive one is to put off the assessment portfolio at least to their junior year when they are more mature and ready professionally. Let our students get involved in the process first, not just the product. Let the portfolio "provide a means for

preservice teachers to reflect on their own growth and assess their own learning" (Dutt, Tallerico, & Kayler, 1997), not just for the sake of following and responding to certain externally determined standards.

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Table 1

Portfolio Evaluation Benchmarks

MoSTEP Standards	Meets the Standard	Not yet meeting the Standard	Insufficient Evidence
1. Knowledge of Subject Matter	Block III	Block II	Block I
2. Knowledge of Human Development	Block III	Block II	
3. Individualization	Block IV		
4. Curriculum Development	Block III		
5. Instructional Strategies	Block III		
6. Motivation and Classroom Management	Block III	Block II	
7. Communication Skills	Block III	Block II	
8. Assessment	Block IV		
9. Professional Development	Block III	Block II	
10. Partnerships	Block IV		

Table 2
Alignment of Instructional Content with Three of the Five Quality Indicators

Quality Indicator	Instructional Contents
1 (Knowledge of Subject Matter)	• emergent literacy • word recognition strategies • models of reading process • schema theory • textual structures • vocabulary building • comprehension strategies • reading and writing processes .....
2 (Knowledge of Human Development)	• classical conditioning • operant conditioning • social learning theory • Piaget's theory of cognitive development • Vygotsky's sociocultural theory • information processing theory • Erikson's theory of psychosocial development • Kolhberg's theory of moral development .....
6 (Motivation and Classroom management)	• Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs • theory of motivation achievement • Locus of Control • attribution theory • theory of efficacy expectations .....

Table 3

Link of Course Assignments to the Documentation of Artifacts for the Assessment Portfolio

Quality Indicator	Course Assignments
1 Knowledge of Subject Matter	• short essays • article critiques • Lesson Plans
2 Knowledge of Human Development	• mini-experiment • moral development interview • reading reflection • lesson plans
6 Motivation and Classroom Management	• classroom simulation • lesson plans
7 Communication Skills	• storytelling • children's book evaluations • brochure for parents • on-line forum • lesson plans
9 Professional Development	• teaching reflections • literacy autobiography

- *Short Essays*: Students were asked to synthesize and evaluate in two essays some important concepts and issues in the field of reading, such as top-down, bottom-up and balanced approaches, definition of reading, schema theory, textual structures, etc.

- *Article Critiques*: Based on the assigned topics, students researched professional journals for articles dealing with issues such as emergent literacy, phonics, Whole Language, Schema Theory, Multicultural Education and reading instruction, Language Experience Approach, Literature-Based Approach, etc. and summarized and critiqued the articles.

- *Mini-Experiment:* Students administered four Piagetian tasks to two children aged from 4 to 10, and then analyzed and interpreted the data, charting the data against Piaget's stages of cognitive development.

- *Moral Development Interviews*: Students interviewed two individuals, one child, and one adult, by presenting two moral dilemmas and then analyzed the data collected through the interviews, charting the data against Kolhberg's, Piaget's, and Gilligan's stages of moral development.

- *Reading Reflection:* Students chose four from the seven theorists given, such as Pavlov/Watson, Skinner, Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, etc., and wrote a reflection paper that discussed the underlying assumptions made in those theories, explained the important terminologies, evaluated the contributions, limitations as well as the educational implications of the theories.

- *Simulation:* Students dramatized and role-played a scenario that could show how to motivate children and how to manage classrooms.

- *Storytelling:* Students told a story using both verbal and nonverbal communication skills such as eye contact, gestures, body movement, props, change of voice, etc. to show that they were able to model effective verbal and nonverbal communication skills.

- *Professional Labs*: In one of the two lab assignments, students evaluated two children's books, one picture book, one storybook , and in the other Lab assignment, they created a brochure for the parents of their assigned class in the field.

- *On-line Forum:* Students were required to participate in on-line discussions on assigned topics which were updated every two weeks.

- *Teaching Reflection:* Students reflected on three of the lessons they had taught in the field, describing the teaching procedures involved, justifying the strategies and activities used, and commenting on the overall strengths and weaknesses.

- *Literacy Autobiography:* Students detailed their reflections on their emergence into literacy in their childhood, and identified the environmental factors that had influenced the way they read and write today and how they perceive teaching of reading and writing.

- *Lesson Plans:* Students composed five lesson plans for reading, language arts and children's literature respectively, in which they applied the content knowledge in real classroom settings.

- *Guest Speakers:* Several expert classroom teachers, ranging from kindergarten to elementary and secondary schools were invited to class to talk about various topics, from early literacy to motivational strategies, from graphic organizers to MoSTEP Standards, etc.

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Preservice teachers' perception of usefulness of portfolio.

Figure 2. Preservice teachers' perception of importance of portfolio.

Figure 3. Preservice teachers' indicated preference between portfolio and traditional assessment methods.

Figure 4. Preservice teachers' indicated intention to use portfolio in future teaching.

Figure 5. Preservice teachers' indicated levels of liking for portfolio.

Figure 6. Preservice teachers' indicated self-confidence levels.

Figure 7. Preservice teachers' projected grades for their portfolio.

Figure 8. Preservice teachers that passed the departmental portfolio benchmark for Block II.

Figure 1

Do you think learning to develop a portfolio is a useful and beneficial learning experience for you?

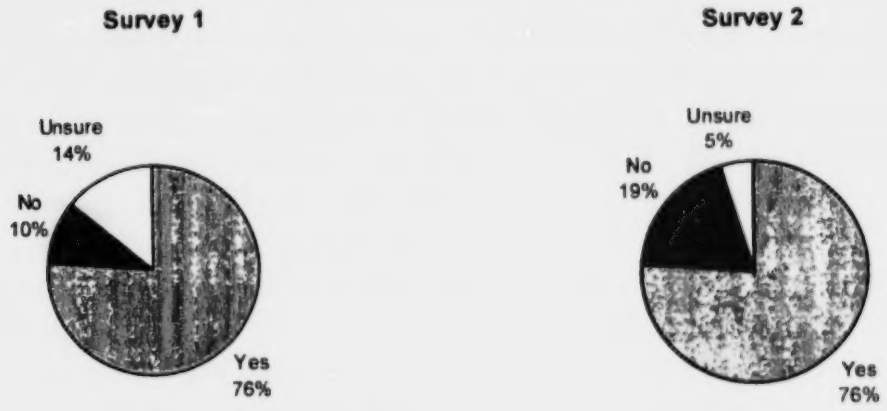


Figure 2

How important is it for you to compose a portfolio?
(5 = Very important; 1 = not important at all)

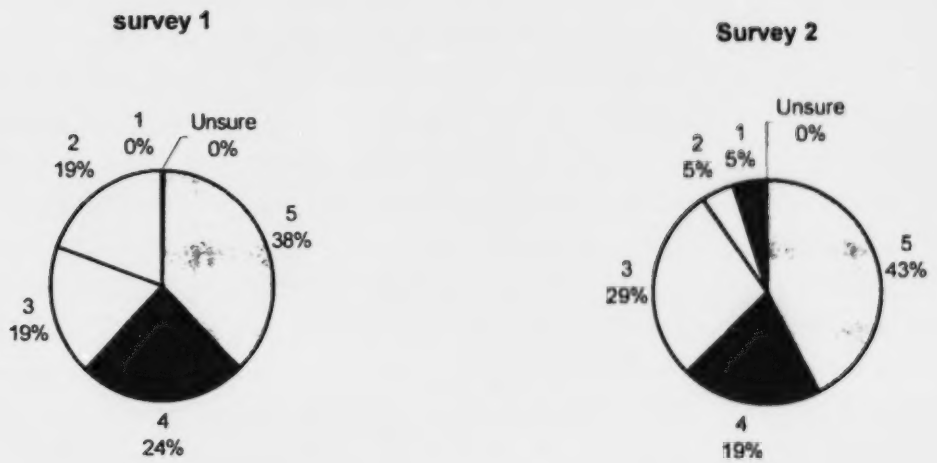


Figure 3

Do you think portfolio is more effective assessment method than traditional assessment methods?

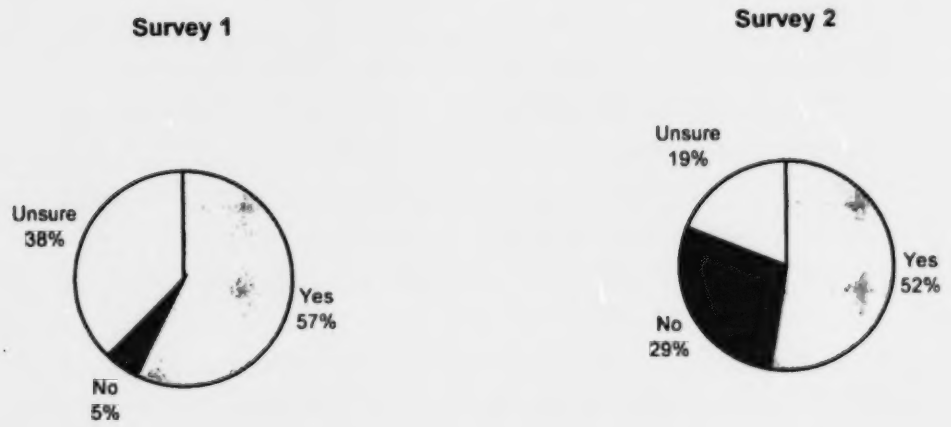


Figure 4

Are you going to use portfolio with your own students in your future teaching?

Figure 5

How much do you like developing a portfolio as part of your learning experience in Block II?
(5 = Like it very much; 1 = Not like it at all)

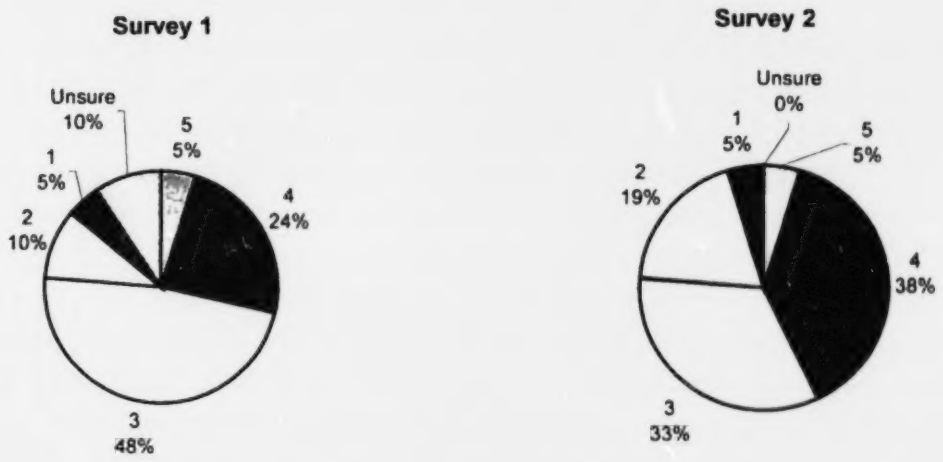


Figure 6

Indicate the level of confidence you have in developing a portfolio now.
(5 = Very confident; 1 = not confident at all)

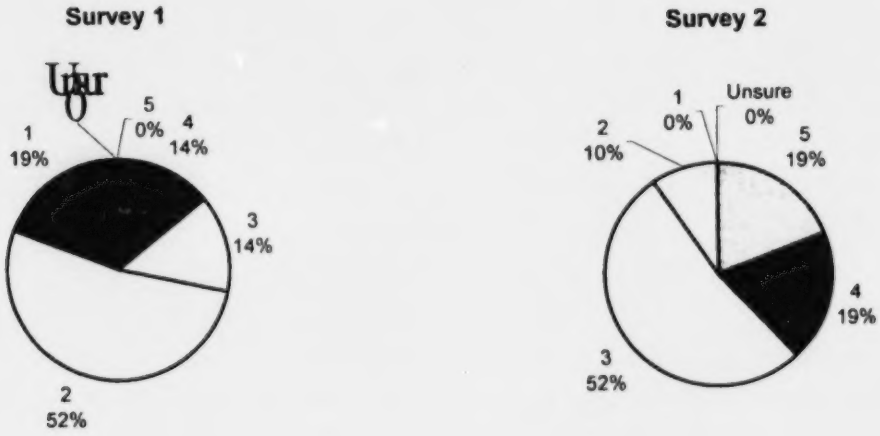
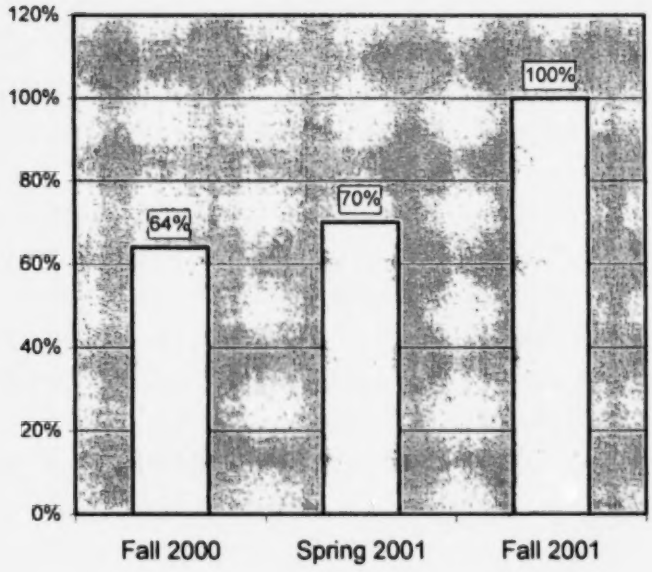


Figure 7

What grade would you expect for your portfolio at the end of the semester?
(a = excellent; B = Good; C + Fair; D = Poor; F = Fail)

Figure 8



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